DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 546 EA 030 712

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TITLE Impact of School Uniform Dress Code on Principal Perception of School Violence.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 26p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Crime Prevention; Data Collection; Data Interpretation; *Dress Codes; Educational Policy; High Schools; Middle Schools; Perception; *Principals; School Administration; School Safety; *School Uniforms; *Security (Psychology); Student Behavior; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS *Long Beach Unified School District CA

ABSTRACT

This report describes a national telephone survey of randomly selected middle and high school principals to measure the impact of school-uniform dress codes on perceived level of school violence. In addition to measuring the impact of school uniforms on principals' perception of violence, selected variables such as region, gender, and educational level were measured to assess for significant differences in principals' perception of violence. The aim was to develop a study that addressed the issue of school uniforms in such a way that the results could be generalized to other middle and high school populations across the United States. In addition to examining the history of the first districtwide uniform dress code implementation, this study cited specific empirical inquiries that have provided support for and criticism against the use of school uniforms as an alternative in addressing the problem of school violence. A total of 141 school administrators within four geographic regional urban school districts were surveyed during the spring 1999 school semester. Parametric tests of statistical significance were utilized to measure the hypotheses under investigation. The findings of this study yielded significant differences among three of the variables measured. There are important implications resulting from this study that merit further inquiry regarding the impact of both school uniforms and the problem of school violence. (Contains 25 references.) (Author/TEJ)

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THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL UNIFORM DRESS CODE ON PRINCIPAL PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

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Abstract

This study conducted a national telephone survey of randomly selected middle and high school principals to measure the impact of school uniform dress code on perceived level of school violence. In addition to measuring the impact of school uniforms on principal perception of violence, selected variables such as region, gender, and education level were measured to assess for significant differences in principal perception of violence. The aim was to develop a study that addressed the issue of school uniforms in such a way that the results could be generalized to other middle and high school populations across the United States. In addition to examining the history of the first district-wide uniform dress code implementation, this study cited specific empirical inquiries that have provided support for and criticism against the use of school uniforms as an alternative in addressing the problem of school violence. A total of 141 school administrators within four geographic regional urban school districts were surveyed during the Spring 1999, school semester. Parametric tests of statistical significance were utilized to measure the hypotheses under investigation. The findings of this study yielded significant differences among three of the variables measured. There are important implications resulting from this study that merit further inquiry regarding the impact of both school uniforms and the problem of school violence.

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THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL UNIFORM DRESS CODE ON PRINCIPAL PERCEPTION OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

A comprehensive review of current research studies related to school uniforms and its impact on school violence uncovered a need for investigating the impact of school uniforms on school violence that incorporated a representative cross-section of school principals within the United States. There were many studies that had been conducted which measured the impact of school uniforms on school environment within particular pilot-programs. However, there were not studies conducted, which measured school principal perceptions regarding school uniforms' impact on school violence whose findings could be generalized to all middle and high school populations within the United States.

Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) was the first school district in the United States that adopted a district-wide uniform dress code policy. To measure the effectiveness of their policy change, LBUSD conducted a five-year longitudinal study. However, these important research findings while useful for LBUSD in determining the impact of school uniform dress code on decreasing violence within their district, can not be generalized to other school districts in the United States who may consider making similar policy changes. Particularly relevant to this study is that the LBUSD study did not randomly select principals from other school districts within the United States to asses for significant differences. In addition, while the

LBUSD study measures the perceptions of principals and teachers within the LBUSD, the LBUSD exclusive sample can not measure regional differences within the United States. Since school uniforms have become a topic of interest nationally, it is important that research findings regarding the impact of school uniforms be investigated in such a way that a representative sample from regions within the United States be included in the study sample. One way of measuring the impact of an intervention such as school uniform dress code is to measure the perceptions of its effectiveness. The researcher has identified three groups whose perceptions regarding level of school violence would be effected by the incorporation of school uniforms. The groups include students, teachers, and principals. This study chose to investigate how school principals who are responsible for executing school policy perceive alternatives addressing the problem of school violence. In addition other variables which are important correlates to perception that were investigated by this study include gender of principal and education level.

DEFINING SCHOOL UNIFORM

According to the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, uniforms are defined as an identifying outfit or style of dress worn by an individual. Uniforms have been historically used in certain work environments, as well as parochial school settings. With the onset of increased levels of school violence, school uniforms are one of many interventions that are being adopted to assist in reducing

violence within the classroom and promote safety in the school. Uniforms have historical significance, and have been associated with positive or negative roles. According to Stanley (1996), the school uniform can serve a variety of purposes and functions within the construct of the school environment. For instance, uniforms serve as a symbol of group membership. In this way, the group members are able to identify with each other. Likewise, non-group members are able to identify group members (Stanley, 1996). In addition, the school uniform can illustrate roles (Stanley, 1996). This allows students to be distinguished from non-students. In addition, they serve to legitimize roles by certifying membership and roles (Stanley, 1996). Finally uniforms define group boundaries, promote group goals and reduce role conflict (Stanley, 1996).

DEFINING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Fostering an atmosphere for students to learn and grow, require a warm and protective place that is violence free. In order to bring about violence free schools, a clear definition of school violence must be understood. School violence, according to the Encyclopedia of Social Issues, is any intentional actions taken while on school property to physically harm or threaten people. School violence is a chronic problem that serves as a threat to the American School System. Some people view non-physical acts such as name-calling, threats, harassment, or stalking as violence. While others dispute this position and believe that only physical assault is violence. In many

instances, cruel gossip and bullying can escalate and erupt into violence. This study will define school violence as any deliberate act that harms or threatens to harm a student, teacher, or other school official.

Quite often, researchers, school personnel, concerned parents, and students fail to distinguish instances of serious crime and violence within the school from disruptions of lesser extent, due to unclear definitions of violence in the public school system. Wayson (1985) stressed that many confuse the issue of violence with the issue of school discipline. In reality, violence and school discipline are separate problems, and confounding them only reduces the probability of solving either one. Minor disruptions stemming from a lack of school discipline can reflect any number of minor incidents including problems of students talking out of turn in the classroom and teachers' inability to maintain control over their students. Most discipline problems never approach the level of criminal or violent intent. Crime and violence are more serious in intent and include such problems as theft, physical aggression, and vandalism.

Moreover, the criteria used in defining school crime and violence vary greatly. For instance, Wolfgang (1977) restricted the definition of violence to "the infliction of physical pain or injury on persons or property and which generally include crimes of violence (homicides, rapes, robberies, assaults, vandalism, riots) whether or not reported and known to the police". While Wolfgang restricted his definition of school violence to more serious criminal behavior, Rubel (1977) contended that disorders,

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disruption, and crimes can all be viewed as forms of school misbehavior. Rubel (1977) contended that violence is not necessary to misbehavior although violence is present in disruptions, crimes, and disorders. The disparity over terms represented by these two researchers serve as an indication of the problem of distinguishing between and defining incidents of school crime and violence.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In response to the increasing incidents of school violence, many schools turned to alternatives such as school uniform dress code policies in order to curtail violence in their schools (U.S. Department of Education, 1996). In addition to commending Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) for implementing the first district-wide uniform dress code policy, President Clinton suggested in his State of the Union message that school uniforms helped deter violence (Howe, 1996). LBUSD officials understood that public schools needed uniforms because there were significant violent incidents occurring in schools everyday. These incidents reported that kids in school were getting killed over designer jackets, assaults on teachers were becoming frequent, and more than 100,000 students were carrying weapons to school each day (Stanley, 1996). There were many cases of school districts such as Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington D.C., experimenting with public school uniforms in the late 1980's; in addition, Michigan had voluntary or mandatory uniforms at the elementary and middle/junior high school level (McManus, 1987; Harris 1989). Moreover,

Bridgeport, Connecticut, Chicago, Illinois, and New Haven, Connecticut initiated voluntary uniform dress code policies (Harris, 1986; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). There were many instances of voluntary, school specific uniform dress code policy implementations in schools across the United States, however LBUSD took the courageous step of implementing a mandatory district-wide uniform dress-code policy. LBUSD initiated this step as a means of fostering a safe and nurturing learning environment for its students and faculty.

The Long Beach Unified School District, after implementing the first mandatory district-wide uniform dress code policy, conducted a study in the Spring of 1995 to collect empirical data regarding the impact of school uniforms on the school environment. The study included students, teachers, principals and school counselors in grades K-8 to obtain baseline data surrounding the issue of school uniforms (Stanley, 1996). Other variables that were measured in their survey addressed academic issues (e.g., desire to learn homework and assignment completion) and other attitudes and behaviors, including perceptions about uniform (e.g., uniforms making it easier to get dressed in the morning). Their findings suggested that LBUSD campuses are safer, although the study findings did not offer clear evidence that uniform dress code policies decreased violence (Stanley, 1996). Ironically, preliminary findings indicate a difference in how adults and children perceive the safety of their school environment. More adults than students including teachers and principals, perceived the school environments to be safer (Stanley, 1996).

The LBUSD, while the first case that offered district-wide empirical data regarding the impact of school uniform dress code policies yielded much criticism from proponents concerned about the implementation of school uniforms (Stanley, 1996). Proponents argue that the data is problematic. Critics point out that true policy effects should be measured from an historical series of observations (Stanley, 1996). Furthermore, proponents argued that the data from the LBUSD Study were not trustworthy (Stanley, 1996). They cited the study methodology does not support the finding that the declines in violent incidents were associated directly with the implementation of a uniform dress code policy. The study did not control for other variables that may have influenced the declines reported by their research. Moreover, there might have been other uncontrolled variables that occurred during this period that could have influenced the declines reported by their research. For example, it is possible that the violence may have reached a peak in 1993-4 (Stanley, 1996).

Since the Long Beach Study other empirical observations have been made regarding the consequences of implementing school uniform policies. One study of middle school students in the Charleston, SC, County School District indicates that school uniforms have a significant impact on student perceptions of school climate. Students in schools that require school uniforms regarded their school climate as more positive, than those students in schools that did not require school uniforms (Murray, 1997). Wiley (1994) reported that the use of uniforms reduces gang recognition and attacks on kids who dress inappropriately. Taylor (1997) states that supporters of the use of school uniforms argue that using uniforms ease peer social pressure in schools, provide a measure of equality and safety, and help cut families' clothing costs. Moreover, Evans (1996) cites school officials that believe the use of school uniforms blur class distinctions, help curb gang activity, and save students from competition in trying to keep up with peers. Other studies concur with these findings. For example, La Point (1993) suggests that school uniforms conceal status, which eliminates gang

identification, and reduces the differences between the students whose families have adequate financial resources and those students whose family have less than adequate resources. Educators hope that school uniforms will decrease gang activity, increase students commitment to school goals, and reduce theft of expensive clothing and jewelry (Schwartz, 1998).

The preliminary results of the LBUSD, while not conclusive, is encouraging to the education community. The education community eagerly awaits the future findings of this longitudinal study. Uniforms potentially offer an easy, low-cost alternative to deterrence of school violence. Therefore, it is not surprising that many researchers in this area cite several reasons that support the use of school uniforms, which included:

- Uniforms can serve as a symbol or representation of the organization, certify the individual as a legitimate member of the organization, and conceal status. They can promote a feeling of oneness among students and can reduce the difference between the haves and have-nots (LaPoint, 1993; Chaterjee, 1999; Murray 1997).
- Uniforms promote conformity to organizational goals (LaPoint, 1993).
- Uniforms can reduce the money young people and their parents spend for clothing. An initial modest outlay is required for uniform purchase and routine care (LaPoint, 1993).

In addition to the above findings regarding the benefits of school uniforms, La Point (1993) reports that uniforms are seen as a concrete and visible means of restoring order and discipline to the classroom. The Roman Catholic Parochial School System conjures up visions on uniforms. The perception of Catholic schools is that they are safe, secure, and orderly learning environments (LaPoint, 1993).

The literature cites many advantages in support of school uniforms however, there are also criticisms cited against the use of school uniforms. La Point (1993) gives several reasons for opposition to using school uniforms:

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- School uniforms restrict student's and parental rights to freedom of expression in appearance;
- School uniforms restricts youth in engaging in normal developmental tasks of identity experimentation; and
- There is lack of research to show relationships between academic achievement, positive social behavior, and youth appearance in schools.

Other criticisms cited in the literature suggests that wearing school uniforms would hardly change student's gang mentality, despite prohibitions on gang attire (Evans, 1996). However, dress regulations, particularly those forbidding clothing associated with gang membership, are increasingly popular. Further, identifying gang members would be difficult once uniform school attire is introduced (Evans, 1996). Contrary to belief, economic differences among students are hardly blurred by the wearing of uniforms (Evans, 1996). No evidence exists to support the view that school uniforms create a better academic school environment, which warrants further investigation (Evans, 1996; Stanley, 1996). Forest (1997) in his report offered the following concerns regarding the uniform dress code policy. School violence is a major concern of American public school districts; however, Forest doubts that the move to school uniforms will produce a great effect on the problem. Forest compared this analysis with installing a metal detector in schools; it is a simplistic solution. Forest reports that more time and funds need to be channeled into solutions that are more lasting such as conflict resolution programs. In fact, implementing mandatory school uniforms is dangerous because it provides communities with a false sense of security (Forest, 1997). It is like putting "a bandage on an enormous wound, instead of attempting to find ways of truly dealing with the bleeding (Forest, 1997)."

RATIONALE OF STUDY

One interesting finding from the longitudinal study conducted by LBUSD was that adults (Principals, Teachers) reported a more positive perception of school environments than did students. The LBUSD study sought to analyze the impact that their policy change (mandatory uniform dress code) had on their particular school district, however one of the limitations of the LBUSD longitudinal study is that researchers limited its study sample to teachers and principals within the school district. While other school districts in the United States may infer usefulness from the LBUSD study, they cannot draw conclusions from their study because the results cannot be generalized to other school districts within the United States. In addition, there is no control group, since the LBUSD policy change was district-wide, the LBUSD study was unable to compare the effects of the treatment (e.g., school uniform). Therefore, one focus of this study was to measure the perceived level of violence among school principals whose schools have not incorporated school uniform dress code policies to assess for differences in perception. In addition, the sample included principals randomly chosen from different areas of the country to assess for regional differences in perception regarding the problem of school violence. Concurrently, differences in perceptions among middle and high school principals, as well as male and female principals were measured.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

An extensive review of major bibliographic databases such as Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Academic Search Elite, EDLIB, and EDNET was undertaken to address the following specific objectives:

1. To conduct an analysis of school administrations perceptions regarding selected independent variable (Uniform Dress Code) and dependent variable (Level of Perceived Violence) to assess for significant regional, gender, education level (middle/high school) differences in perception.
2. To suggest recommendations for future research related to uniform dress code policies and school violence.

HYPOTHESES

HO_1: There is no significant difference in the level of perceived violence among those principals in schools with a uniform dress code and those in schools without a school uniform dress code.

HO_2: There is no significant regional difference in the level of perceived violence among those school principals.

HO_3: There is no significant difference in the level of perceived violence between middle school principals and high school principals.

HO_4: There is no significant difference in the level of perceived violence between male principals and female principals.

METHOD

SAMPLING PROCEDURE

The population from which the sample was selected consists of all primary and post-secondary education schools within the United States. The population was stratified into four separate regions within the United States. One school district within each region was randomly selected to be part of the initial study sample. The initial study sample consisted of 230 schools, which included 137 middle schools and 93 high schools. In addition to randomly selecting school districts, the researcher randomly selected school campuses within each school district, which comprised the final sample selection. This process was conducted by assigning each school campus within the school district a number, and using a table of random numbers, and selecting 2/3rds of the school campus from each district to be included in the final sample. Results of the final sampling selection process yielded 161 school campuses. The head principal of each school campus included in the final sample was then contacted and asked to participate in an 8-minute telephone survey.

INSTRUMENT DEVELOPMENT AND DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

The survey instrument was adapted using specific questionnaire items from, Metlife's American Teacher Survey, Violence in America's Public Schools: The Family Perspective, that were relevant to the purpose and objectives of the current investigation. The Metlife Study investigated contributing factors to violence as

believed by parents and students in light of reports regarding differing views of students and parents about violence. A pretest was performed to evaluate the following aspects of the telephone survey:

a. Individual questions;
b. The questionnaire as a whole; and
c. Procedures for coding and computerizing the data
d. Content validity

Middle and high school principals within a selected district in Louisiana were used to pre-test the instrument. The group offered criticism on the wording of the telephone questionnaire. Their comments addressed their understanding of the questions, wording of the items, and question sensitivity. Many of the questions were changed to reflect their comments. Also, assistance was provided by members of the research committee in critiquing the wording of the questions.

The implementation of the survey was patterned after Don Dillman's Total Design Method (TDM) for mail and telephone surveys (Dillman, 1978). This method was used because of the relatively high response rates yielded by this approach. TDM guidelines include the following:

1. Reward the respondent by showing positive regard either through verbal or written feedback (e.g., thank you).

2. Reduce cost to the respondent by making the task appear brief, thereby reducing the physical and mental effort that is required or eliminating chances for embarrassment.
3. Establish trust by providing a token of appreciation in advance, such as identifying the study with a known organization that has legitimacy or building on other exchange relationships (e.g., results are intended to decrease violence in your school or others).

The researcher contacted the school principal to collect data in an 8-minute telephone survey. Respondents were asked to participate in the project on a voluntary basis. To encourage voluntary participation, respondents were told that their answers were intended to assist public schools in providing safer schools. The researcher mailed a copy of the survey questions that were asked during the telephone survey to those principles chosen to participate in the sample in advance of the telephone call. This was done to reduce the chance that the participant would not misunderstand or misinterpret the survey question when asked during the telephone survey. In addition, the researcher forwarded a cover letter along with the survey questions. The letter explained the research topic and emphasized that participation was voluntary. Further to insure the study participants of confidentiality and anonymity, the cover letter explained that the information was secured and would be presented in aggregate form upon completion of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

The four independent variables measured in this study included: 1) uniform dress code; 2) region; 3) gender and 4) educational level. Independent variable uniform dress code was measured in a questionnaire item, which asked the respondent "Does your school require its students to wear a school uniform?" Similarly, independent variable region was measured by a questionnaire item, which asks the respondent "what geographical region is your school located?" Gender was measured by a questionnaire item that asks the respondent to report whether they were male or female. Educational level was measured by a questionnaire item that asks the respondent to report whether they were a middle school principal or a high school principal. The dependent variable of this study was level of perceived violence. Principal perception was measured by using a five point Likert-scale questionnaire item, which asks the respondent "How would you rate the level of violence in your school?"

Several of the hypotheses measured differences between separate means, therefore the research chose the independent t-test to test HO_1, HO_3 and HO_4 (Miller, 1991). Hypothesis two involved multiple level data, and thus the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test this hypothesis (Miller, 1991). In addition, frequency distributions were run to acquire descriptive information regarding the samples' demographic and summary variables. The researcher used the SPSS-PC+ software package to conduct the entire analyses.

RESULTS

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

The first hypotheses proposed that there was no significant difference regarding principal's perceived level of violence in schools with uniform dress code policies and schools without uniform dress code policies. Survey item Q2, which asked the respondent "Does your school require its students to wear a school uniform?" was paired with survey item Q8, which asked the respondent "How would you rate the level of violence in your school?" The findings revealed that those principals that required a school uniform reported lower levels of perceived violence (m = 1.25) within their schools than those principals who did not (m = 2.23). These findings were significant at the .01 alpha level; therefore this study fails to accept hypothesis one.

The second hypothesis sought to measure regional differences in reporting level of perceived violence. Survey item Q3, which asked the respondent "what geographical region is your school located?" was paired with survey item Q8, which asked the respondent "How would you rate the level of violence in your school?" Interestingly, the findings of this measurement demonstrate that the means do not appear to differ appreciably. They range from a minimum of 48.5 percent in the Eastern region to a maximum of 53.5 percent in the Western Region. An analysis-of-variance test shows an F statistic of 1.38 under the null hypothesis regarding regional

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differences. Thus, there is no evidence of regional differences in principal perception regarding the level of school violence, at the .01 significance level.

The third hypothesis measured educational level differences in reporting the level of perceived violence (e.g., Do middle school principals perceive violence to be greater in their schools than do high school principals?). Survey item Q1, which asked the respondent "Do you work in a middle school or a high school?" was paired with survey item Q8, which asked the respondent "How would you rate the level of violence in your school?" The results indicated that principals from high schools ($n=72$; $m=2.57$) had a significantly higher level of perceived violence than did principals from middle schools ($n=69$; $m=1.57$).

The fourth hypothesis measured gender differences in reporting level of perceived violence. Survey item Q4, which asked the respondent "Are you a male or female?" was paired with survey item Q8, which asked the respondent "How would you rate the level of violence in your school?" Male principals ($n=82$; $m=1.25$) generally reported lower levels of violence in their schools than their female ($n=59$; $m=2.36$) counterparts. The findings yielded from HO_1, HO_3, and HO_4 were significant at the .01 alpha level; therefore the researcher failed to accept these hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

This research began with an inquiry into the problem of violence in public schools. Specifically, the perceptions of principals regarding their perceived level of violence were measured. Differences according to region, gender, and education level were measured. Although the researcher failed to accept three of the hypotheses measured in this study, there are important implications and recommendations which merit further examination.

The LBUSD Study gained considerable criticism from those who questioned the conclusions that its preliminary findings suggested. For example, Stanley (1996) reported that critics pointed to the need for an historical series of observations. This study added to the necessary series of observations suggested by critics. In addition, it expanded its observations beyond that of a single school district to include districts located in several regions of the United States.

As mentioned, one crucial aspect of this research was to measure regional differences in reporting perceived level of violence among principals. It was the hypothesis of the researcher that the different socio-environmental factors associated with each region might impact upon the outcomes associated school violence perception. Although this study found no significant regional differences in perceived level of violence among schools, it was important that an inquiry of this kind take place. More importantly, it was necessary to include a representative sample of school

principals throughout the United States to measure the impact of school uniforms on their perceived level of school violence. Too often, those in control of policy change within schools make decisions based on data results that are not generalizable to their specific population. Policy makers discover the information and apply the findings to their situation, not understanding that the information is not applicable to their school district. This study attempted to gather data that could be generalized across school districts within the United States.

This study's results yielded information, which illustrated significant differences in the perceptions among male and female principals, as well as educational level (e.g., middle/high school principals). Research questions that arise from these findings include: 1) Are female principals more sensitive to violent activity within schools; 2) Are there differences in what men perceive as violent behavior as opposed to women; and 3) Does violent activity increase in high school settings versus middle school settings? These questions should lead to other critical inquiries in this area.

The findings from this study are unique in that none of the current research has conducted a study of school principal's perceptions of school violence that incorporated variables such as regional, gender and education level. The findings of this study indicate a need for a more comprehensive analysis of factors that contribute to school violence. In addition, the results of testing suggest that student violence continue to be a concern among principals within the school environment.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study will be useful to many school districts that seek to improve learning for students by creating safer environments in which they learn. The principal is the educational leader within their school setting. Therefore, it is the leadership that can serve as the cheerleader for change in the school environment. The perceptions of principals regarding anti-violence initiatives such as the uniform dress code and its impact on the school climate are important in understanding the present problem of violence in public schools. Moreover, their perceptions influence other factors that impact the school climate such as the role of family and community on school climate.

The relationships associated with school violence are diverse and complex in nature. In order to gain better insight regarding preventative measures, such as the uniform dress code which promote safe school environments, continued research in this area should be undertaken. Researchers should investigate the long-term consequences of school uniform dress code on the education environment, as well as the developing individual. Therefore, further research regarding the impact of school uniform dress code should address the following areas: 1) assess the impact of school uniforms on religious expression; 2) assess long-term impact of school uniforms on identity development; 3) assess outcome differences regarding the various types of uniforms worn. The research refused upon in this study demonstrates the need for future studies assessing the cause and prevention of violence within the school setting.

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